> Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity; for the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, shows that the greater number of species of each genus, and all the species of many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct.
>
> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

> But I will not weary the reader with useless enthusiasms for obliterated pictures or smashed churches or shattered towers and palaces or rubble-choked streets. If they are gone, they are gone; and there is no use in making people unhappy by saying that they have forever lost beautiful things.
>
> Richard Aldington, *A Wreath for San Gemignano*

ATMOSPHERE OF GEMS

John James Audubon's illustration of the Carolina Parakeet depicts seven of the birds. One for each day of the week or, if you prefer, one for each of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the seven deadly sins, or for each color of the rainbow. One, whose head is green more or less all over, is a juvenile. The rest, the adults, have green bodies and yellow heads. (The Seminole people referred the Carolina Parakeet as "puzzi la née," or "head of yellow.") On each little yellow head there is a

mask-like patch of red covering most of the face. One can't help but be struck both by the bright, toy-like colors—the birds look as if they have been painted in a factory for children to play with—and by the mischievous expressions on the feathered faces. They look as if they are smiling. This is not gratuitous anthropomorphization on the artist's part; they look this way in photographs, too. They are also said to be social and quite lively, even raucous—again, all of this comes across in the illustration. The parakeet on the bottom of Audubon's picture is staring directly at us. A challenge? An invitation?

How many people in the United States are aware that there used to be a parrot species native to the their country, and that until the late nineteenth century large flocks of these colorful birds could be found in swamps and bottomlands of the southeastern and midwestern U. S., from Florida to parts of Texas and Colorado, and as far north as Pennsylvania in the east and Nebraska in the west, with occasional sightings in Michigan, New York State, and elsewhere? They were

particularly numerous in Florida, where the more colorful subspecies *Conuropsis carolinensis* was centered, though the bird's range extended along the coast in both directions. The slightly less vividly colored subspecies, *Conuropsis ludovicianus*, was found farther to the north and west. Both the *carolinensis* and the *ludovicanus* disappeared completely some decades ago. The last captive Carolina Parakeet died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918, in the same cage where Martha, the last captive passenger pigeon, had expired four years before. The last wild Carolina Parakeet passed away some time after that. It is not known precisely where or when.

The parakeet's beauty had been remarked on for centuries by explorers and settlers. William Strachey's *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britannia*, published in 1612, which gathers observations from many early settlers of the mid-Atlantic coast, includes the following passage: "Parakitoes I haie seen many in the Winter and knowne divers killed, yet be they a Fowle most swift of wing, their winges and Breasts are of a greenish colour with forked Tayles, their heades some Crmysen, some yellow, some orange-tawny, very beautyful."

'The parakeet is a beautiful bird," Henry Schoolcraft wrote in an 1819 publication, *A View of the Lead Mines of Missouri*. "It is a kind of parrot; its colours are green, yellow, and red, all bright colours, and it is a pleasing sight to see a flock of them suddenly wheel in the atmosphere, and light upon a tree; their gaudy colours are reflected in the sun with the brilliance of the rainbow."

"We have seen no bird of the size, with plumage so brilliant," wrote the minister Timothy Flint a few years later, "and they impart a singular magnificence to the forest prospect, as they are seen darting through the foliage, and among the white branches of the sycamore." Around the same time, Alphonso Wetmore wrote that "The paroquet found in Missouri deserves notice, as peculiar in character and attractive in its plumage. This is a bird strongly resembling the green parrot in colour and form; and it is reported of them, that at night they repose within the cavity of a hollow tree, hanging by their curved Roman nose-beaks."

Longer than a Man's Lifetime in Missouri, an 1877 autobiography by Gert Goebel, a German settler in eastern Missouri, contains the following evocative description:

> These flocks of paroquets were a real ornament to the trees stripped of their foliage in the winter. The sight was particularly attractive, when such a flock of several hundred had settled on a big sycamore, when the bright green color of the birds was in such marked contrast with the white bark of the trees, and when the sun shone brightly these inhabited tree tops, the many yellow heads looked like so many candles.
>
> That sight always brings back a vivid memory of a kind of Christmas tree that was customary among some middle class families of my native city (in

> Germany.) Several weeks before Christmas, a small young birch tree was set in a tub of water. After some time the small tree put forth weak, delicate foliage in the warm room. When it was decorated on Christmas eve with gold and silver colored apples and nuts and lights, it resembled a treetop populated with parrots, only these colossal Christmas trees in the forest (the sycamores) looked more majestic than the tiny birch trees in the small rooms.

Large numbers of these living ornaments had also been encountered by Warren Angus Ferris, near Franklin Missouri, in February 1830. "Near the village," Ferris recorded, "we met with innumerable flocks of paroquets – the first I had seen in a wild state – whose beautiful plumage of green and gold flashed above us like an atmosphere of gems."

FOR LIGHT, FOR STARS, FOR RAINBOWS

> *Dear girl. They will not—it's we who do—end.*
> David Baker, "Never-Ending Birds"

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird, Keats sang to his nightingale. The temptation, for poets, is so often to make birds symbols of immortality. Surely a creature that can defy gravity can also defy death. (In his program notes for *Quartet for the End of Time,* Olivier Messiaen writes: "The abyss is time, with its weariness and gloom. The birds are the opposite of Time; they represent our longing for light,

for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song!") So we grow up thinking of birds as analogies for the soul; for the soul, too, is pictured as the part of the person that defies gravity, that is immaterial and weightless. The part that flies.

There is also this: among the living things of the earth, birds are among the most beautiful. So if, like Keats, you are inclined to think that *A thing of beauty is a joy forever*, then you are all the more likely to see the birds as permanent fixtures, an unchanging part of the natural landscape. Vibrant, animated artworks which, like the Grecian urn to which another of his odes is addressed—and, for that matter, like the ode itself—*shalt remain, in midst of other woe / than ours.*

If the nightingale seemed immortal to Keats, it is largely because he identified it with its song, for it is the same song that is sung by one generation of nightingales after another, and heard by one generation of poets after another, who feel nearly identical emotions, perhaps, at the sound, and who find themselves moved just as their predecessors were. Contemporary biologists often speak of DNA along similar lines, as the immortal material that persists while the organic beings that carry it are born and perish. Which makes sense, really, because DNA, like a song, can be thought of primarily as information. Consider how many people these days store their music libraries "in the cloud," and of how many fantasies of "de-extinction"—of reviving lost species, a la *Jurassiac Park*—have been fed by this metaphorical resonance. The same resonance that convinces people we will soon be able to escape death by uploading our personalities, our memories, our very identities, into some form of data storage. We like to believe, these days, that so long as you possess the information, you can reconstitute, re-animate, the thing. Poets, too, die while leaving their songs behind, songs that entice us to believe they are not really dead. Keats is long gone, almost two centuries now, but we still, some of us, recite "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

They might have been different birds, but Keats, like most of us, couldn't tell one individual nightingale from another, so it seemed to him not only that the woods were always full of birdsong, but that it was the very same birds that were singing:

> Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
> No hungry generations tread thee down;
> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown:
> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
> The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

You can't step into the same river twice, but for the most part the river *looks* the same, and the noise of the running water sounds the same. Until recently the default stance was to regard the natural world as a permanent and largely unchanging edifice into which human beings come to be and pass away, an enduring background against which we conduct our ephemeral, ever-changing affairs. And so Keats was persuaded, or persuaded himself, to see a kind of eternal life in "those dying generations"—to borrow a phrase from a poem by Yeats, written a little more than a century after Keats' great odes. "Sailing to Byzantium," which clearly has those odes on its mind, finds its speaker averring that, should he be offered the choice, he will never again, having suffered this mortal life, choose to occupy a material body. Let him instead be a mechanism, something crafted and made, something that will not rot; let him be a mechanical, artificial bird, *Of hammered gold and gold enameling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; / Or set upon a golden bough to sing…*

THE GUN IS KEPT AT WORK

"Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises," writes John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. We are told that when, in the winter off 1780, a flock of Carolina Parakeets landed on a house in Schoharie, New York, the local residents took it as a sign that the apocalypse was imminent. "The more ignorant Dutch settlers were exceedingly alarmed," wrote botanist and physician Benjamin Smith Barton. "They imagined, in dreadful consternation, that it portended nothing less calamitous than the destruction of the world." The incident took place, of course, during the Revolutionary War; and indeed, a year later the building was burned to the ground by British troops.

Audubon wrote in his *Ornithological Biography* that these parakeets were "fond of sand in a surprising degree, and on that account are frequently seen to alight in flocks along the gravelly banks about the creeks and rivers, or in the ravines of old fields in the plantations, when they scratch with bill and claws, flutter and roll themselves in the sand, and pick up and swallow a certain quantity of it. For the same purpose, they also enter the holes dug by our Kingfisher. They are fond of saline earth, for which they visit the different Licks interspersed in our woods."

Those who described them noted their sociability and curiosity. Like other parrots, they were sometimes kept as pets—though unlike many other parrots the Carolina Parakeet could not, or would not, learn to imitate human speech, and some, including Audubon himself, found their vocalizations irritating. They traveled in large groups and seemed to display a kind of loyalty that worked against self-preservation: many observers described how, when one was shot, others would fill the area, as if to stand with their dying comrade. Here is Audubon again:

> [T]he Parakeets are destroyed in great numbers, for whilst busily engaged in plucking off the fruits or tearing the grain from the stacks, the husbandman approaches them with perfect ease, and commits great slaughter among them. All the survivors rise, shriek, fly round about for a few minutes, and again alight on the very place of most imminent danger. The gun is kept at work; eight or ten, or even twenty, are killed at every discharge. The living birds, as if conscious of the death of their companions, sweep over their bodies, screaming as loud as ever, but still return to the stack to be shot at, until so few remain alive, that the farmer does not consider it worth his while to spend more of his ammunition. […] Should a person shoot at them, as they go, and wound an individual, its cries are sufficient to bring back the whole flock, when the sportsman may kill as many as he pleases.

The explorer John K. Townsend provides a similar account from 1834, writing that the Carolina Parakeets he had encountered

> seemed entirely unsuspicious of danger, and after being fired at only huddled closer together, as if to obtain protection from each other, and as their companions are falling around them, they curve down their necks and look at them fluttering upon the ground, as though perfectly at a loss to account for so unusual an occurrence. It is a most inglorious sort of shooting, downright, cold-blooded murder. … And so, a few men bearing arms could easily eliminate entire flocks at a time.

WE, ONLY, CAN SEE DEATH

… *And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.* We find ourselves imagining different orders of being, and then asking, as if it were up to us, which we would like to belong to. As if, the poems ask us to imagine, we had the chance to choose our own fundamental natures. Reading "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Ode on a Grecian Urn," we pose to ourselves the question: to be a living thing, or a work of art? To inhabit a world of eternal silence and immateriality, or to live in the organic realm of birth, action, and death? Or perhaps it is not ourselves we are asking, but the universe. It is not *quite* as foundational as "to be or not to be," perhaps. But it is not too far off the mark.

The longing to be a work of art, and to become, in this way, immortal, runs alongside other longings, and the connections between them are always complex. Closely related is the somewhat more attainable desire—Keats, at any rate, managed to attain it—to achieve a kind of artistic immortality, through fame. *I think I shall be among the English poets after my death*, he famously predicted in a letter to his brother. But Keats also knew that fame would not constitute genuine

immortality. And so, throughout his poems and letters, we find Keats longing to defeat mortality in a different way: to know nothing of fame and the desire for fame, to know nothing of death and the fear of death, to know nothing of mortality and the desperate human need to somehow overcome it.

"O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!", Keats famously wrote in a letter from November 1817. Nearly two years later he writes, to his fiancée Fanny Brawne, "I almost wish we were butterflies, and liv'd but three summer days—three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain." There is a profound contrast between this sentiment and that seemingly expressed in so many passages of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Consider again the consoling words to the "bold lover," who is invited to accept without regret the impossibility of kissing his beloved as the inevitable cost of their eternal existence—or, for that matter, the sensibility expressed in those final lines of "Sailing to Byzantium." To be a mechanical bird rather than an organic one, as a way of sidestepping mortality and decay—the sensibility that would accept three days of butterfly delight over fifty years of human life is the opposite of this, the other side of the existential coin. It attempts to solve the problem of time—which is to say, the problem of death—not by detaching from life and holding oneself in an invulnerable and immaculate space, but by plunging into life so profoundly and unreservedly that there is no detachment, no separation, no crack into which fear or knowledge or human self-consciousness might seep.

To know nothing of time, decay, or death. To know nothing of mortality, and hence nothing of immortality, either the immortality of fame or the immortality of Plato's eternal forms; this, for the Romantic poets—and for those who followed them, like Rilke—is a way of being immortal, of escaping death. In the eighth of his Duino Elegies, Rilke writes,

> We know what is really out there only from
> the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
> child and force it around, so that it sees
> objects—not the Open, which is so
> deep in animals' faces. Free from death.
> We, only, can see death; the free animal
> has its decline in back of it, forever,
> and God in front, and when it moves, it moves
> already in eternity, like a fountain.

It is as if humans, by virtue of their poisonous self-awareness, live in an entirely different world from the animals. As if, unlike them, we were required to wage a never-ending struggle against our own natures in order to inhabit the world at all.

IN THE CLOUD

The very idea of extinction, as fundamental as it is to the world we live in, is a relatively recent conceptual innovation. The tendency for most of Western history has been to regard the world as permanent and unchanging. In particular, the tendency in Western Christian thought to see the world as being governed by a benevolent deity posed a profound impediment to the idea, argued by Georges Cuvier and a bit later on by Darwin, that *kinds* of beings might go out of existence, just as individual organic beings do. Why would God create beautiful creatures only to allow them to pass out of the world? In "Essay on Man," Alexander Pope had written:

> All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
> Whose body nature is, and God the soul.

To see nature as a body is to see it as a unity, something created at one moment whose habit is to stay together, remain constant, and preserve a fundamental integrity; not as something that changes form, that loses parts and grows new ones—as something, that is, that evolves. A central element of the intellectual revolution achieved by Darwin was to replace the body metaphor with a different one, the metaphor of nature as family. "When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited," he wrote, "they seem to me to become ennobled." Families, after all, are constantly losing members and replacing them with new ones. Moreover, there would have been a natural link in the Victorian mind between the word 'extinction' and the idea of the family: until Cuvier came along, the English word 'extinction' had mostly been used in connection with royal or noble lineages that had died out or were in danger of doing so. Still, the idea that biological lineages—species—could also die out was bound to upset the Victorian view of the universe as an orderly, well-run machine. Darwin, while admitting that "Neither single species nor groups of species reappear when the chain of ordinary generation has once been broken," softened the impact of this intellectual blow by placing a positive spin on the idea of extinction, viewing it as a kind of hygienic process, a way of making space for what he liked to refer to, in a phrase redolent of mid-20th century advertising lingo, as "new and improved" versions of life: "The extinction of species and of whole groups of species, which has played so conspicuous a part in the history of the organic world, almost inevitably follows on the principle of natural selection; for old forms will be supplanted by new and improved forms." "As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being," he quite famously—and wrongly—went on to write, "all corporeal and

mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection." A comforting thought.

The Carolina Parakeet, though, does not seem to have been done away with in order to be replaced by a "new and improved" version; and it is difficult to see its disappearance as part of a process whose general tendency is toward any form of perfection. These beautiful birds were shot in large numbers for many reasons, or for no reason at all. Some farmers regarded them as pests that laid waste to fields of grain. Others killed them for sport, or for their feathers, which adorned fashionable ladies' hats. Scientists shot them, or had them shot, to be preserved and serve as specimens. It is likely, though, that the shooting, as widespread and unnecessary as it seems to have been, had less of an impact than the loss of habitat caused by human activity—a common narrative in many extinctions. Other factors, too, played a role. The honeybee, for instance, often builds its nests in hollow trees, the same nesting sites preferred by the Carolina Parakeet. (Then again, we humans are implicated here too, since honeybees first came to North America on ships departing from Europe.) Although they persisted into the twentieth century, their numbers began precipitously to decline by the middle of the nineteenth century, early enough that Audubon himself, along with many others, commented on the rapidity of their diminishment.

NOW MORE THAN EVER SEEMS IT RICH TO DIE

From a certain austere ontological perspective, preferred by some who consider themselves scientifically-minded (and who understand science itself in a certain austere way), there are no collectives, only individuals. But individuals are parts of collectives, and are shaped by collectives, and the nature of individual memory can make it meaningful, at least in the case of human beings, to speak of collective memory. Such memory is forged and passed on through culture: we write things down, we pass knowledge, concepts, and stories along to those who come after. We tell our children what they will need to know in order to live well, and we tell them, too, about what the world was like for us. Few of us, though, have been told about the Carolina Parakeet. We have not heard much, in fact, about the dimensions of the world that have been lost through the years, the treasures our ancestors gave up, sacrificed, inadvertently destroyed, or merely allowed to slip away. Were there more birds in our parents' skies, more birdsong in the trees of our grandparents' childhoods, than in our own? (I seem to remember there being more birdsong in the trees of *my* childhood—but memory, of course, can be misleading.) How often have we been told that our parents, or their parents, occupied a country in which there was "an atmosphere of gems"? When it comes to loss, we seem to display not collective memory but collective amnesia.

In other ways, though, collective knowledge and memory make an awareness of loss available to us. We know, for instance, that we are going to die, and that before we die we will likely suffer. And this is something we would not necessarily figure it out on our own; if a human being is the creature who knows that he will die, it is very often because he has learned this from other human beings. It is through language that most of us learn that we are mortal. But if not for language we would have no way to manifest our longings and laments.

Keats's desire for fame —which he saw as, in its own way, a means of achieving a kind of immortality, and hence a way of solving the problem of death—was nothing other than a desire to become an enduring part of human culture, to be passed on the way enduring memories are passed on. Not knowing about death would be a way of not caring about fame. It would mean not having to worry about whether one's work is likely to endure, not having to worry about whether one's life is "meaningful." From such a vantage point it is natural to conceive of animal consciousness—the kind of consciousness it is natural, from this vantage point, to aspire to—as a state in which one would possess no standards of meaning, in which one would not, and would not want to know, the meaning of anything.

It often seems that for these poets, to not know the meaning of anything would be, in the deepest sense, to know the meaning of everything. As Rilke writes in the seventh Duino elegy:

Oh to be dead at last and know them endlessly,
all the stars; for how, how could we ever forget them?

That is to say, it is a short step from longing for a kind of animal consciousness in which one is entirely unaware of death to longing for death itself. As if death were pure and life impure, and thus—this is a thought we find lurking at a very deep level in both Platonic philosophy and Christianity—death could be seen as the ideal culmination, the true fruition, of everything life aspired to be. A theme that emerges clearly in "Ode To a Nightingale," whose speaker identifies thought with pain (*Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs*), idealizes animal awareness as a mode of being that is free from such pain (*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known, / The weariness, the fever, and the fret…*), and—perhaps despairing of the possibility that we might ever become like the animals in this way—ends up, inevitably, desiring death:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

FAMOUS LAST BIRDS

"Civilization does not agree with these birds," the ornithologist Charles Bendire commented in 1895. We probably should not be surprised that this is so, given what we know about how our civilization has turned out, about what it appears to value. Beauty, it seems, is not high on its list of priorities. Consider the strip mall: such a fabulously, radically ugly thing, it is somewhat hard to believe that its existence is even tolerated, let alone that people deliberately construct them, and pour considerable resources into doing so. But to complain about the ugliness of the strip mall is not merely to reveal yourself as an anachronistic romantic, it is to identify yourself as an enemy of progress, and perhaps of democracy itself. To acknowledge, perhaps even to admire, the utilitarian genius and inarguable convenience of the strip mall is part of the ideological imperative of our times. Whereas it is permissible, indeed encouraged, to have no deep or abiding interest in beauty at all.

"How could we have lost, and then forgotten, so beautiful a bird?" asks Christopher Cokinos, author of *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds*. But it makes a difference who the *we* is—whether we are talking about the memory of individuals, or rather have in mind that necessary but mysterious concept, *collective* memory. The collective *we*—we Americans, we

inhabitants of this country—have indeed displaced, hence lost, and then forgotten, the Carolina Parakeet. Having driven it out of existence we have not preserved a niche, in the shared space of our memory, that it might inhabit. As for individual humans, most of those who exist now did not have the chance to forget the Carolina Parakeet. They—we—never got to see them. A few of us have viewed pictures of them, or encountered preserved specimens, little stuffed exemplars stored in drawers and catalogued like books; almost no living humans have enjoyed the sight of them in the trees, in the skies, or on fields of wheat, which, as Audubon wrote in his *Ornithological Biography*, they "frequently cover … so entirely, that they present to the eye the same effect as if a brilliantly coloured carpet had been thrown over them."

One way to go on, at this point, would be to list the species that we, if we are lucky, have gotten to observe for ourselves, but which our descendants will not have the chance to see, and therefore will not have the chance to forget. I could list the magical, majestic species that are, even as I write, even as you read, heading toward oblivion. But what point is there in making people unhappy by telling them that they have lost, and are losing, beautiful things?

Perhaps, then, I should instead follow Lewis Hyde's lead in his recent book, *In Praise of Forgetting*, where he suggests that

> if forgetting is a fall into birth and time, then a pure, triumphant memory will mean an end to emerging life and a fixing of time, everything stuck just where it is (stuck, we might say, in those eternal, unchanging forms). … True, when time flows, we are in the world of sickness, old age, and death, but we are also in the world of fertility, new life, and fresh action, and it is these that call for an allowed forgetting.

Memory, here, is linked with the stasis of the designs on Keats' urn, frozen figures incapable of "fertility, new life, and fresh action." Bury the urn—or break it—and we free ourselves from the past. But of course it matters in what order we arrange the ideas. Hyde's sentence would have had an entirely different impact if he had written: 'True, when time flows, we are in the world of fertility, new life, and fresh action; but we are also in the world of sickness, old age, and death.'

At any rate I do not wish to allow myself, or any of us, to forget the Carolina Parakeet. So let us remind ourselves once again that the last captive Carolina Parakeets, a pair named Incas and Lady Jane, lived in the Cincinnati Zoo, in the same space in which the last captive passenger pigeon, Martha, had recently lived, and died. Lady Jane perished first, in 1917; Incas endured for a few months longer. According to Anita Albus in *On Rare Birds,* Incas's body was supposed to be shipped to Washington, D.C. to be autopsied and stuffed by staff at the Smithsonian, as had been done with Martha and Lady Jane. But the body, preserved in a block of ice,

disappeared at some point on the journey and was never found. Is it possible that the disappearance of Incas is at least partly responsible for the fact that Martha, and the species she represented, have endured in our collective memory in a way that the last Carolina Parakeets—who were, after all, considerably more beautiful than the rather drab passenger pigeon—have not?

All of the dates are questionable. In his 2004 book, *The Carolina Parakeet: Glimpses of a Vanished Bird,* Noel Snyder describes how he spent years interviewing elderly residents of Florida, many of whom remembered seeing Carolina Parakeets. It is clear, from these interviews, that Incas was far from the last of the breed; the Carolina Parakeet survived at least into the 1930s in Florida, and possibly into the 1940s. There is at least some small chance that tiny populations of the bird might have survived for years after that, like squads of resistance fighters hiding out in the hills. For Snyder, the Carolina Parakeet functions as a symbol of a multitude of losses, including the loss of a certain vision of our country, and of ways of life that few now remember. In his elegiac introduction to *The Carolina Parakeet*—a book that presents, alongside the stories of a vanished bird, stories of the kinds of people who have vanished just as decisively from the American landscape: swamp guides, moonshiners, plume hunters, alligator trappers, egg collectors—he writes:

> The era when residents freely roamed an unfenced Kissimmee Prairie in search of abundant wild game has long passed, and an era of no-trespassing signs, housing developments, fast-food diners, and parking lots has taken its place. No vote was ever taken for launching these changes, and perhaps there are many who would not have opposed them if given the chance. Others, who regret what has been lost, know as well that there is no way to return.

REMARKS ON COLOR

> Until in the bird everything becomes a little more apprehensive and more cautious. His nest is already a little maternal womb made secure for him by Nature, which he only covers instead of wholly containing it. And suddenly, as if it were no longer safe enough outside, the wonderful maturing flees wholly into the darkness of the creature and emerges only at a later turn into the world, taking it only as a second world and never again to become quite weaned from the conditions of the earlier, more fervent one.
>
> Rilke, from a letter to Lou Andreas Salome,
> February 20, 1918

The fragment quoted above was written by Rilke the day before the last Carolina Parakeet in captivity passed away, an event widely—albeit wrongly—viewed as the end of the species. Rilke would of course not have known what was about to happen thousands of miles away in the Cincinnati Zoo, and I have no clear idea what "the bird" referred to in this fragment meant to him or is supposed to represent. Nor do I really know what he means in referring to "a second world." Somehow, though, his use of the phrase makes me think of something the philosopher Alexander Nehamas once wrote, that beauty "is part of the everyday world of purpose and desire, history and contingency, subjectivity and incompleteness. That is the only world there is, and nothing, not even the highest of the high arts, can move beyond it."

And this, in turn, makes me think of the passage in his essay on Wallace Stevens—in a discussion of Stevens' "Domination of Black," a poem of three stanzas whose first and third stanzas end with the line, "And I remembered the cry of the peacocks"—in which the poet Robert Hass notes that as a child, first discovering the poem, he somehow failed to connect the central auditory image of the peacock's cry to the actual peacock cries he had heard. "Art hardly ever does seem to come at us first as something connected to our own world," Hass writes. "It always seems, in fact, to announce the existence of another, different one, which is what it shares with gnostic insight. That is why, I suppose, the next thing that artists have to learn is that this world is the other world."

That this world is the other world. One single world, but a world thought of in two ways, a world seen from two points of view. One single world that can look to us, for all the world, like two. As Zhuangzi says, "If you were to hide the world in the

world, so that nothing could get away, this would be the final reality of the constancy of things."

So that nothing could get away. Whereas what we seem to be surrounded with, instead, are countless, relentless proofs of the inconstancy of things. Which we, collectively, decide to ignore, even forget, in order that we may continue to live and enjoy the fact that we exist in the world.

If this world *is* the other world, then there is only this world, and no other. But each species, each creature, perceives the world differently, so that there are many worlds within the one, each with its own colors, noises, tastes. Tastes we humans cannot taste; colors we humans cannot see. Tastes, noises, and colors we can only imagine, or perhaps cannot imagine. The lines quoted from Rilke's eighth Duino elegy encapsulate a strong version of this: "We only know what is really out there only from / the animal's gaze." As if animals could see reality while humans cannot. We could, if we were not willing to go quite this far, assert a modified version of the idea: animals see a world we cannot see. And it follows from this that when an animal goes extinct, a world is lost. *Esse is percipi*, said the philosopher George Berkeley. To be is to be perceived. So when the Carolina Parakeet went extinct, the world lost two sets of colors: those displayed on its feathers, and those the world displayed to its eyes.

"A color shines in its surroundings," proposed Wittgenstein in *Remarks on Colour*. "Just as eyes only smile in a face."

"The spirit has no voice," wrote Leonardo da Vinci. "Because where there is voice there is body."

Suppose that Incas had indeed been the last of his kind. He would not have known that this was so. Unlike his human tenders and observers he presumably would not even have been able to form the thought, or wonder whether he was in fact the last, or to believe, or lament, that he was. It is highly doubtful that parakeets have a concept of "our kind" that is anything like the human concept so familiar to us. Nor would they have a concept of extinction. Extinction, like death, is a human concept. *We, only, can see death.*

What the parakeets had, in place of the concept of extinction, was a cry that was sufficient to bring back the whole flock, back to the place where the guns were being kept at work. Do we, in our catalog of laments, possess anything comparable?

"Every scheme for the analysis of nature has to face these two facts, *change* and *endurance*," writes Alfred North Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World*:

> There is yet a third fact to be placed by it, *eternality,* I will call it. The mountain endures. But when after ages it has been worn away, it has gone. If a replica arises, it is yet a new mountain. A color is eternal. It haunts time like a spirit. It comes and goes. But where it comes, it is the same color. It neither survives nor does it live. It appears where it is wanted.

Another comforting thought. But “wanted” is too optimistic: no matter how much we might want to see again the colors of the Carolina Parakeet, they will not come. They continue to exist, perhaps, in some immaterial realm, the realm that contains eternal things, the things that haunt time like spirits. This is how they remain the same, by existing outside of space and time, neither surviving nor living; so that, “when it comes, it is the same color.” But this realm is only the realm of the imagination. Even Keats’ Grecian urn is a material thing that exists in time and will someday end, like DNA, like preserved specimens of birds, like photographs. Like the memories that are encoded in our very organic, very material brains, that we may struggle to preserve or endeavor to forget. Like a mountain, an urn may strike us as monumental, as permanent, but it too has its life, its narrative, its death. Just as we are learning to see the ocean, the atmosphere, the planet itself as temporal and finite, entities with their own lives, their narratives, their deaths. It is the realm that the urn depicts, not the urn itself, that is eternal. But that depicted realm does not exist. It only fools us, by allowing us to depict it, into believing that it does.

Who, if I cried out, would hear me, among the parakeet orders? What cries now would be sufficient to bring back these flocks? To repopulate our sycamores with living ornaments, their little yellow heads flaring “like so many candles”? For this world—*where but to think is to be full of sorrow*—is the other world. A creature extinct in this world is extinct in every world. Once out of nature, it shall never again take any form, assume any body, whatsoever.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird. But the atmosphere of this world is no atmosphere of gems.

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